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ABSTRACT

Three articles offer parents suggestions on how to make television a positive experience for their children. An editorial introduces the following themes basic to all the articles: type and amount of television viewing should be regulated by parents, parents should discuss television with their children, and parents must become aware of the differences in the way adults and children perceive television portrayals. The first article weighs television's current tendency to influence children's opinions, values, and behavior through a basically distorted world view against its potential for offering sound problem solving models and encouraging children to examine their self-worth and their family and social values. The second article summarizes the developmental stages and preferences in children's television viewing. Originally developed as a handout for parents, the final article outlines a 4-week program for making family television watching more participatory and more critical. (LP)

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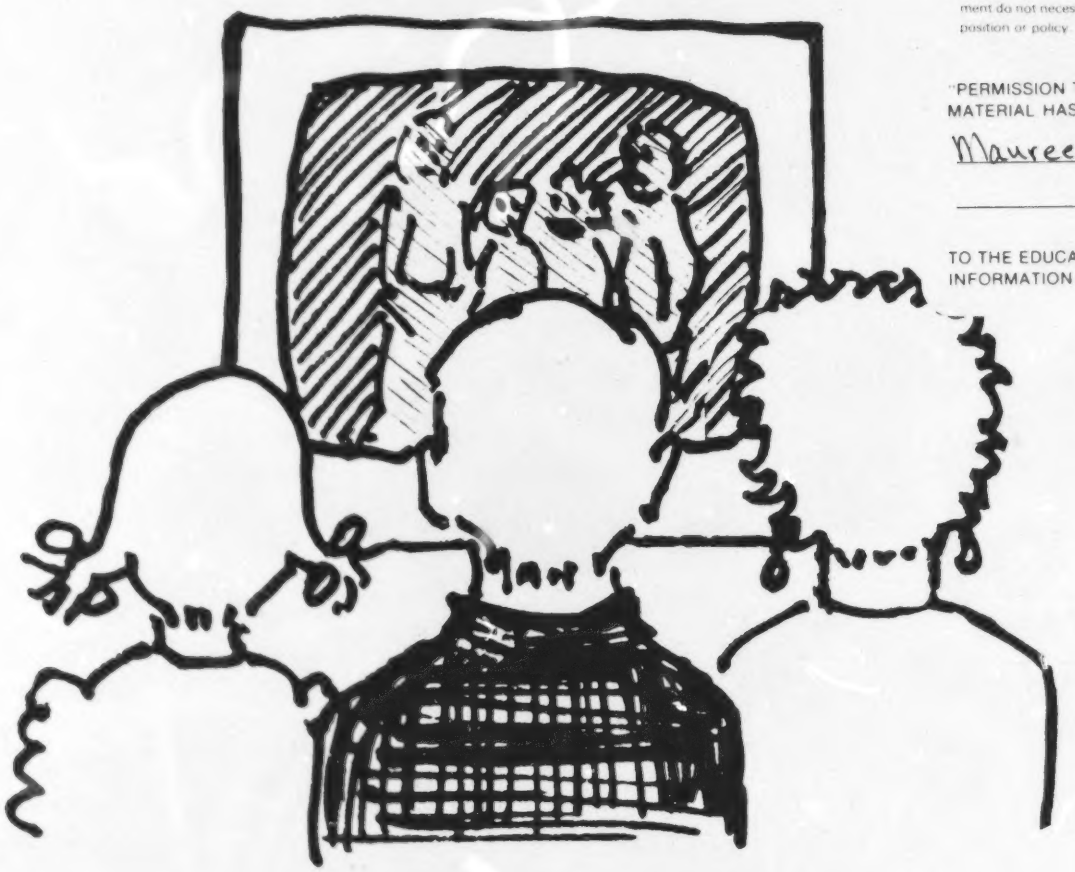

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# parents, kids and tv

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Spring 1983 (Vol 6 No 1)


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**Maureen Gaffney, Editor**

# from the editor

During a recent survey of *Young Viewers'* readers, we received a number of requests for information about television that would be of help to parents. This issue thus contains three articles which address the area and offer suggestions for how parents can cope with television and make it a positive experience.

In all three articles, certain points come up again and again. One is that television intake must be regulated. Too much of any one type of program, and too many TV calories (that is, too much time in front of the tube) are not healthy. As they do with food, parents must teach children — both by instruction and example — how to watch television and how to balance their TV diet.

Another point the articles make explicit is that parents cannot afford to ignore television. Like other realities of the modern world, TV must be discussed — and it must be discussed *at home*. An effective approach with school-age children — an approach that emphasizes content rather than production technique — is for parents to become aware of why certain programs appeal (or do not appeal) to them and their children and then discuss how those likes and dislikes fit into the family's real-world values, needs, and lifestyle. Because of younger children's limited capacities, television can only be discussed with under-sevens when the viewing experience is shared.

The articles also affirm one of the Media Center for Children's most basic tenets: children do not understand television or film the same way adults do, and children of different ages vary a great deal in what they comprehend. Parents must become aware of the differences between how *they* and *their children* perceive people and events on television, and how their children's perceptions and viewing preferences will change as they mature.

Finally, the articles emphasize the importance of caring adults — especially parents — in the lives of children. TV certainly needs to change if it is going to meet the needs of children, but, at least for now, it may help to remember what Fred Rogers says in the lead article: television will never have as much impact on a child as her/his parents do. Watching TV together and developing family dialogues about television is one way to insure that.

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Fred Rogers, creator and host of the PBS-TV television series *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and Barry Head have just completed a helpful book entitled *Mister Rogers Talks to Parents* (New York: Berkley, 1983). Excerpted from the chapter in that book which addresses the issue of television, this article examines both the problems and the possibilities television holds for children and parents.

**what parents should know about children and television** 5

Grant Noble, Associate Professor in Psychology at Australia's University of New England (Armidlae, New South Wales), has written *Children in Front of the Small Screen* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1975) and numerous papers on children and television. His article, a synopsis of developmental stages and preferences in children's televiewing, was condensed from a paper presented at a 1979 seminar — Parental Guidance on Children's TV Viewing — which was held in Adelaide.

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Jack Livesley, Educational Development Officer at TV Ontario in Canada, regularly gives workshops for parents and educators on helping children become critical televiewers. In collaboration with Lynne Hyne, Livesley has developed an excellent *Utilization Unit: Curriculum Applications of Critical Viewing Skills* (Toronto: Ontario Educational Communications Authority, 1982) which is based on the concept of learning about television by "playing TV." His article, originally developed as a hand-out for parents, includes guidelines for making family television both more participatory and more critical.

# mister rogers talks about television

**by fred rogers and barry head**

For more than twenty-five years I've been working in television; and, although I've experienced a lot of disappointments and disillusionments with television in that time, I've never lost my belief in its great potential for good. Fortunately, I find it confirmed, again and again, when I see the many excellent programs that help us all better understand our environment and our place within it, or that enable us all to share the cultural heritage of the arts. But, there is an awful lot of other stuff, too, much of which, at best, is a waste of time and, and at worst can be downright destructive. In fact, television programmers' casual, and often cynical attitude toward childhood, played a large part in my decision to work in television and has much to do with my intention to keep on trying to provide alternatives.

Since one can't be a communicator with equal impact on all segments of society, I made an early decision to communicate with children. I've tried to help children feel good about being children and hopeful about who they can become. I've wanted to help children discover worth in little things, in things that had no price tag, in people who might have outer handicaps and great inner strengths. My associates and I have been more fortunate than most people in the world of television programming because we have had the luxury of time — time to grow in our work, and time for our work to grow into what it has become. But is time to develop really a luxury? I think it has been a *necessity*.

### The "Inner Drama"

Many people have told us of a pattern their children followed when watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. The younger they were, the more likely they were to be interested in the parts of the program where I was on the screen — often in close-up. In fact, if they were very young, their attention would wander during the parts when I wasn't seen. As they grew to be four or five, they watched the whole program and came to understand how the parts related to one another. As they grew older still and were beginning to take a greater interest in their play and in the outside world, their major attention shifted to the adventures of the characters in the "Neighborhood of Make Believe."

We have heard, too, that many two-year-olds were fascinated with Julia Child. As soon as her program, *The French Chef*, came on, children all over the country would run to the kitchen, pull out some pots and pans, and then sit for thirty minutes watching intently all that Julia was doing.

If my conjecture — that television viewing is somehow analogous to viewing the mother's face in infancy — is by any means valid, then television viewing could be considered as having its roots at that very core of human development. Obviously, there's a great difference between nourishment from human mothers and nourishment from television sets; but one of the biggest differences is that a loving human caregiver can respond to how the child is feeling. A television set certainly provides stimulations, but when those stimulations touch a child's inner feelings, television just goes on stimulating, sometimes in ways that are beyond the young child's ability to manage. Television programs can easily play into children's "inner dramas" and spark anxious feelings. Unaware of what they have done, programmers take no steps to resolve the anxieties they have aroused.

If you want to know more about your own inner dramas when you're watching television, think about why some programs move you and others don't. Or think about why you and your friends have different reactions to the very same program. What one family member finds "a dumb old program" may have real and unsuspected meaning for another. One way television can be used constructively is to help family members become sensitive to one another's inner dramas. A television program can offer an opportunity to talk about a lot of different feelings, and by talking about them we may help one another make them manageable. However, the inner dramas of early childhood are perhaps the hardest for adults to understand. They are subtle and deep; and, of course, young children do not have the concepts or words to talk about them.

### Learning Readiness

Much research on the effects of television is contradictory or inconclusive, but that doesn't make the research useless, wasteful, or futile. We need to know as much as we can about how children learn, and conscientious research of any kind can teach us, if nothing else, how to do *better* research.

As far as children and learning goes, I've come to believe a very simple statement: Children can learn almost anything both easily and well so long as they are *ready* to learn. That does sound simple. What's *ready*? That's my concern with television's role in learning: *Does it help children become ready to learn, or does it sabotage the development of a child's readiness to learn*?

When I think of learning readiness, six fundamentals come immediately to mind. They may not be everything a child needs to learn, but they are certainly basic necessities. They are a sense of self-worth, a sense of trust, curiosity, the capacity to look and listen carefully, the capacity to play, and times of solitude.

To me, the most important of the six is the one I listed first — *sense of self-worth*. In order for children to have a strong sense of self-worth, part of what they need to feel is that each human being is unique — *and* that uniqueness has value. But in the television world, people are often stereotyped; they come out of set molds. And what's more, it is *things*, not people, that are presented as having the most value. Advertised products, and material possessions that dramatic characters have, want, steal, or kill for, are things that television implicitly says have value. The people who are given value are usually beautiful or handsome, strong, aggressive, athletic, sexy, smart, and affluent. The people who aren't beautiful, etcetera are usually the "bad guys."

I think it is helpful for children to see that each person has both strengths and weaknesses, abilities and limitations, times of courage and times of fear, blemishes, and the whole gamut of human emotions. Feeling lovable and capable of loving another is part of what a child needs for self-esteem. I think television makes this very hard for young children because so many programs insist that doing something bad makes you a bad person.

The good feeling of self-control is another facet of self-esteem. I don't believe that spending hours and hours looking in on a TV world where people routinely lose their self-control (as though all people behave that way) is any help to children.

Children learn best from real live caring adults — adults they have learned to *trust*. Trust is important for all the strivings of young children; nowhere, however, is it more important than in helping a child learn to

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talk about feelings. I don't believe that educational gimmicks can be helpful in teaching children who are burdened with overwhelming anxieties. For them, learning readiness means the reestablishment of trust.

*Curiosity.* The best of television can be a powerful and constructive stimulant to a young child's curiosity. Even before children are capable of actually learning from programs, they can feel an excitement in discovery. Television can give children a sense that they and their world are wondrous creations and help them see that people are capable of creating and doing wonderful things. Precisely because curiosity has deep emotional roots, the worst of television may be very damaging to a child's urge to explore, try out and understand. I think that fear has a lot to do with some children's difficulty in *looking carefully and listening carefully.* A human being can take only so much frightening stimulation before he or she shuts off the desire to look or listen carefully to *anything.*

Certainly the quick pace and fragmentation of television do not help children develop the capacity for careful looking and listening; there isn't time amidst the constant changes in focus and subject matter. Sustaining attention tends to foster deliberate thought. What the hectic pace of television may foster, I'm not sure. Deliberate thought, however, is not something we expect of young children; that capacity develops later. But readiness to develop that capacity does begin very early as children engage in daydreaming, fantasizing, and making up all kinds of activities that we call play.

Some excellent research suggests that, quite apart from content, most television programs are put together in ways that hamper both imagination and learning. As Drs. Dorothy and Jerome Singer, psychologists and codirectors of the Family Television Research and Consultation Center at Yale University, wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 23, 1979):

> "Is it possible that the rapid pace of presentation, the quick shifts of focus, the speeded-up blend of visual, musical and verbal material that characterize American TV may actually be impeding our [children's] capacities for sustained attention, deliberate thought, and private imagery? . . . . . Our research evidence suggests that while children may indeed pay attention and keep their eyes glued to the television screen, the rapid pace and constant intrusion of new material seems to interfere with effective learning . . . . . We need slower-moving programs, more sustained images, less frenetic activity."

Parents sometimes ask, "How much television is okay for my child?" That's not really possible to answer, because no specific amount of time is right for all children. It depends on what the child is like, what television means to him or her, and what's on television. There are some children whose life experience is so restricted that television is enormously enhancing. There are others who might be using television as a detachment from life; that could restrict their development. Figuring out how much television is appropriate for a child is a little like making sure that the child has a balanced diet. The best of television programming can be a nourishing part of a diet that also includes time with parents, time with other children, time for active play, time for quiet play, and time for sleep. If television watching is taking over a child's waking hours, we can be sure that's too much television.

Another part of healthy self-esteem is feeling that you're able to learn and knowing that learning is worthwhile. That's certainly a major part of readiness to learn! The feeling of being capable to learn is something a child gets (or doesn't get) through experiences at home, at day care centers, or in school. As for feeling that learning is worthwhile, television often speaks to that in very negative ways. Three years ago, *Newsweek* reported that nine of the ten most watched television programs in this country were situation comedies which shared the common theme that being dumb was best and that being smart was square. These programs consistently made fun of achievement, dedication and hard work.

Solitude may seem like a grown-up concept to use for children, but it's an important ingredient in children's readiness to learn. For young children, comfortable solitude often means being near someone they love. It's only when they are a good deal older that they may want to be alone in their rooms or in another part of the house. For a long time before this, children may need to see or hear someone they love nearby; it's still a form of solitude.

**Violence**

Many questions from parents have to do with the violence on television: "How harmful is it, and what can we do about it?" Researchers come to different conclusions; however, more and more they are finding direct corollaries between television violence and real-life violent acts. I am personally convinced that regular exposure to television violence *can* seriously hurt a child's emotional growth. What programs are unsuitable is a judgement you must make. I think parents have a responsibility to make the judgement and place off-limits those programs they do not want their children to see.

Children can, however, learn to cope with many scary things in life — violence on television included — so long as they have caring adults at hand to help them. Watching television with children, and talking about it, is the best way to keep TV violence from becoming overwhelming and damaging. You may even be able to turn whatever violence children do see into a positive experience, so long as you see it with them. You can, for instance, use it to help children identify feelings, strengthen their own sense of self-control, sort out what's real and what's pretend, understand family values, understand more about cause and effect, and learn more about how the *real* world works.

Whether you think the values shown on television are good or bad, they offer an opportunity to help children understand more about your own family values. When you see a destructive or angry family confrontation on television, you might want to talk with your child about how angry feelings are handled in your family. When you talk about things like this, you are passing on the values you think are important.

All television programming moves too fast for lengthy discussion while you are watching, but it is surprising how much you can say during commercials or between programs. Even just asking, "What do you think about that?" or "Why do you think that happened?" helps turn your child from a passive watcher into an active thinker, perhaps storing up questions to ask you at another time.

It's often hard to know what young children are thinking, so that makes it hard to know what they need to hear. I've found that asking questions before giving answers is often the best way to help children reveal just what their fears or misperceptions may be. Asking a child how he or she *feels* about a scary or violent TV episode can be the beginning of a really important talk.

When children talk about the violence they see on television, adults may be in for some surprises. Sometimes we assume that they understand what we understand — and understand it the same way. For example, adults may see a violent police drama as a playing out of the familiar concept, "Crime does not pay." We know what to expect, we accept the conventions, and our attention is mainly held by new variations on the old theme. Children, on the other hand, who have none of this prior understanding and experience, may get from the same crime show the message that people are aggressive and violent, and that policemen shoot the ones who are "bad."

**Conclusion**

In our own culture, television is practically universal. It affects our relationships with neighbors, friends, and family. It's so widespread that there are some families in this country who buy a television set long before they install indoor plumbing. Television is *in* the real world; however, its portrayal of the real world is very unreal. It is curious to consider, but its unreal, distorted view of the world is now influencing our opinions, shaping our attitudes, modifying our values, providing models of behavior, altering our buying habits, and participating in the raising of our children.

The common culture of television doesn't have to be a bad thing just because it is so widely shared. Potentially, television can speak to the inner nature of the child and the parent. It can speak of issues in parent-child relationships and what it means to be a family. There's a lot to talk about as children grow. There's sadness and disappointment, anger and frustration, danger and even death. Television gives us plenty of opportunities to talk about these things. What it doesn't give as much of is the chance to talk about love, compassion, commitment, integrity, the preciousness of life — the things that help us feel good about being individual, unique human beings.

Television could meet real human needs. It could help children learn to recognize feelings and develop healthy ways of dealing with those feelings. Television could offer a wide variety of healthy problem solving models. It could encourage children to look for their own inner worth, their family traditions and values. Television could help broadcast the value of childhood and communicate the fact that childhood lies at the very basis of what human beings are and what they can become. It could help children reflect on who they are and what they want to be. Television could do all these things. It sometimes does; but mostly it doesn't. Parents can and often do.

In all of this, keep in mind that what parents give their children will always be more important than what television gives them.

# what parents should know about children and television

## by grant noble

I do not wish to present myself as a moralist with a list of *do's* and *dont's*. This would be most inappropriate, because there are few formulae which can be applied to all situations. Rather, I would like to convey the little we know about children's understanding of television. Given such information, parents may be better able to effectively monitor their children's televiewing.

Despite Piaget's recently diminished position (i.e., current researchers talk of age-related trends), I will take as my starting point Piaget's (1950) developmental theory. This theory demonstrates that the child's world is not only different from the adult world, but that some twelve or more years of steady development are required before the child thinks as an adult. Children between ages two and twelve live in different worlds from both the adult and the adolescent.

In the pre-school (or pre-operational) years, the child's view of the world is unique. Later, during what Piaget calls the stage of concrete operations, the child cannot cope with hypothetical and spatially remote events, since his/her thought processes are limited to the present. The difference between the here-and-now thought of the younger child and the hypothetical thought of the adolescent explains why different aged children vary in their understanding and reactions to the same television programs.

### Televiewing Styles of Children from Two to Six/Seven

Often when talking about a television program with younger children, I wonder whether the children and I have seen the same program. Piaget's conception of *egocentrism* in the pre-operational stage helps to explain such discrepancies. *Egocentrism* will color the young child's televiewing in at least four ways. First, young children are likely to respond to their environment, including television, in an all-or-nothing manner; young children perceive television characters as *all good* or *all bad*, with no happy in-between. Second, young children are unable to perceive events from any point of view other than their own; such children may regard TV as real because they are not capable of imagining that people can act dramatic parts. Third, young children will classify objects and events both on and off television in unique ways; such children may, therefore, be unable to recognize the same television character in different situations. Fourth, young children are unable to reverse the constituents in a chain of reasoning; such children cannot always remember what has happened before in a television program and may not follow the storyline.

As far as all-or-nothing (binary) responses to television characters are concerned, Gomberg (1961) reports that four-year-olds thought people on television were either all good or all bad. All cowboys, for example, were good—as were policemen and soldiers, but all Indians and robbers were bad. Some children said only bad people bleed but not good ones. One four-year-old boy was found hysterically crying in the playground when he had grazed his knee, shouting, "I am not bad." Likewise, children thought conflict had to be resolved in an all-or-nothing way—"You cannot talk to the bad guys; you must shoot them."

I have asked young children in several countries about the reality of different television programs. The majority of children between two and four/five years say the programs are *real*, people can fly. Confusions between reality and fantasy are an integral part of the youngest children's televiewing style and, in fact, persist among older children. Even adults are not free from such beliefs; Marcus Welby used to receive a thousand letters a week, mainly asking for medical advice (*Philadelphia Bulletin*, July 10, 1974).

While most pre-school children do not know that television characters are the same in different settings, Franck (1955) reports that some six-year-olds thought the mouse hero in *Town and Country Mouse* was a different animal in close-up than in long shot. Likewise, many insect-pest films have reassured African villagers who were pleased they did not have insects as large as those depicted in close-ups; so again, this confusion is not necessarily limited to children.

In several studies, researchers have found that pre-school children are only interested in the separate incidents that they see, and understand little of the story. I find that children aged five and under do not understand the story, whereas, six-year-olds do. Five-year-olds thought that the film had ended if I stopped it midway, whereas, six-year-olds did not.

Long ago, McLuhan (1964) noted that pre-school children could not differentiate commercials from the television program which surrounded them. Thus, for the pre-school child with little concept of story development, commercials will be seen as part of the program.

### Televiewing Styles from Six/Seven to Eleven/Twelve

According to Piaget, somewhere between the age of five and seven a congnitive revolution takes place: the world of the child in the stage of concrete operations becomes organized, imagined, and thought about in a new and more efficient way. The revolution explains why six-year-olds understand the story of a television program; they can mentally retrace the events seen, and predict forward, in a way that is inaccessible to the younger child. This perhaps explains why Himmelweit *et al* (1958) found that seven to nine-year-olds most enjoyed westerns because they had learned the format so well that they could predict the ending.

Children show a gradual increase in plot understanding as they grow older. However, six and seven-year-olds concentrate on incidents at the expense of plot development. Egocentrism at this stage is essentially the inability to perceive events from any point of view other than one's own. It is not until the end of the concrete operations stage that the child becomes able to imagine her/himself in other people's shoes. Children up to and including nine, understand only the concrete physical behavior of actors; it is at ten that children first understand the feelings and motivations of characters.

Some ten years of steady development are thus required before the child is spontaneously able to admit that points of view other than her/his own are possible. When I ask children to describe programs they have seen, it is the ten-year-olds who go beyond descriptions of gross overt

***although there are changes within each stage, as well as variations among individuals within a stage, children between ages seven and twelve (the stage of concrete operations) differ in how they understand television programs from both children under six (pre-operational) and adolescents (the stage of formal operations)***

actions and talk about the characters' intentions and feelings. Similarly, it is the ten-year-old who is first able to interpret the symbols used on a television program.

The major implication of these findings is that children develop very different television needs as they grow older. In my view, to group six to twelve-year-olds inclusive as a child audience, ignores the very real development which takes place between these ages. I would caution that it is difficult to produce a single program which will appeal to six and twleve-year-olds. Not only is the twelve-year-old firmly in the stage of formal (rather than concrete) operations; sixes will love those predictable format shows which tend to alienate those aged ten or older. I would like to recommend more segmentation of this audience in both research and programming.

In order to help them enter concrete operations, series programs should be made for the six to eight-year-olds which make use of repetitive formats. As seen earlier, once children have discovered the storyline, they love programs which conform to simple formats and allow them to anticipate what will happen next. Westerns, some cartoons, and *Batman* are examples of such formats, which (whether we like it or not) six, seven and eight-year-olds will actively seek out. Programmers should have no anxiety about repeating shows for younger children; they love repeats, even though their parents may not—which illustrates why it is important to test programs with child audiences and not rely exclusively on adult responses.

Until nine years of age, children find it impossible to read between the lines in TV shows. Programs made for pre-nines must be totally explicit. It is only *by observing how characters respond to events they see* that children learn how the character is feeling in those situations. Unfortunately, television producers tend to use production methods which do not suit young children. The extensive use of symbol in television for young children is a case in point. My research suggests that it is not until ten years that symbols are comprehended by child audiences — yet so many programs for younger children rely on symbolization.

**Televiewing Styles of Children Twelve and Older**

The onset of formal operations marks the beginning of the end of egocentricism in thought. Adolescents may be expected to share the adult's conception of the world and to comprehend films as efficiently as adults. Having rejected the here-and-now world of the child, the middle-class twelve-year-old will reject those fantasy programs so popular with younger children and turn towards realistic materials which may be perceived as useful with regard to his/her future. Adolescents are also likely to imagine the sorts of relationships which may exist between film characters, even if they are not portrayed in front of the camera; thus, teenagers should be able to explain apparent inconsistencies in the behavior of film characters. Prior to fourteen/fifteen years (the ages which absolute hours of televiewing first declines during childhood), young adolescents will seek out programs which enable them to see themselves in roles they may occupy in the future.

Various researchers, including myself, have found that adolescents, twelve and older, recall television programs as well as adults. Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1961) noted that there was a turning point around eleven years when upwardly aspirant adolescents rejected televised fantasy in favor of print. I have found that the twelve-year-old makes the most categoric distinction between reality and fantasy on the television screen. In the middle-class adolescent, we see the antithesis of the pre-operational child: while one believes fantasy to be true, the other rejects fantasy; while one reacts in an all-or-nothing way, the other weighs arguments and ideas — and, despite not liking an idea, can appreciate its merits; while one has no comprehension of story, the other has such a highly sophisticated concept of story that she/he reconciles inconsistencies in the plot by concentrating on the motives of the characters.

We now know, from research conducted in Australia (Noble and Noble, 1979), that one of the prime reasons for watching TV early in the formal operations stage is for anticipatory socialization. Adolescents watch *Happy Days* for two reasons; *first*, so they can talk about it with their peers and parents (when viewers have watched the same show they can talk about it as equals, thus obviating the usual role deference in conversations); *second*, three-quarters of the eleven and twelve-year-olds, and sixty-percent of our overall sample of eleven to sixteen-year-olds said they learn social skills such as asking for a date, being popular with people, and how to get on with parents from *Happy Days*. Adolescents will, thus, seek out programs which provide socialization into the teenage role they are soon to enact. In many instances, such programs (i.e., *Mork and Mindy*) also appeal to adults. Adolescents will, of course, watch adult programming.

According to Keilhacker and Vogg (1965) adolescents will not accept coincidental solutions to problems which their yonger counterparts take on trust; they prefer programs which spell out the logical continuity of the plot. While adolescents show more highly differentiated program preferences than younger children, they reject the overplayed and stylized portrayals which enable younger children to cope with the storyline. Similarly, adolescents prefer plots related to human relationships, self-concept and identity. While they prefer realistic (as opposed to stylistic) portrayals, this does not mean that they like "informal" programs; rather, they prefer drama which is shown as realistically as possible.

### Why Children Watch TV

Noble and Freiberg (1979) asked six to eleven-year-olds why they watched their favorite TV shows. We sought to discover what gratifications or pleasurers they derived from them. Answers were revealing in so far as they highlighted the many needs which children said televiewing satisfied. These included:

- *To talk about the show in school the next day*: Many children watched programs simply so that they could talk about them and play games derived from them in school the next day.
- *Humor*: Children need to laugh after a hard day in school. Humor turned out to be the most important single reason — for all ages and both sexes — for watching favorite shows.
- *Relaxation*: Many children reported that they used television in order to relax or calm down. Cartoons, in particular, were sought out for the purpose of unwinding.
- *Positive mood change*: Many children turned to the television set because they were in a temper or feeling low. Often it was humor they sought out. Some boys even sought out aggressive programs for this reason.
- *Aggression*: While realistic or news aggression did upset many children, boys often sought out ritualistic or stylized aggression. They said watching people punch, as in *Batman*, made them feel good; none that we talked to indicated that TV violence made them violent.
- *Learning*: Children are curious about the wider society in which they live, and television provides several types of learning for them. One type can be called *social learning* whereby, through dramatic shows, children imbibe societal values, such as that lawbreakers will be brought to justice, or that medicine cures most ailments. Children also use TV content for socialization purposes, as with *Happy Days*. Children said they learn from television, but the learning is not school oriented; rather, it is life-space learning. Greenberg (1974) found learning to be the primary reason children watch TV.
- *Characters*: Viewers interact with the people on TV. Liking specific characters accounted for one-fourth of the reasons given for watching favorite TV shows; this appealed more to girls than boys. Girls were particularly appreciative of children in starring roles.
- *Arousal*: Many children watched not to be calmed down, but to be stirred up. In general, excitement and fast-paced programs — including sports as well as cops-and-robbers — attracted older boys. Young children, however, found high levels of excitement somewhat too scary for comfort. Apparently, boys of all ages seek out shows which break the monotony of everyday life.
- *Habit/Passtime*: This is included here for the sake of completeness, since Greenberg (1974) found habit, and to pass the time, were the motives which twenty-percent of the children cited for watching TV. We found only two children in over one-hundred gave this as their prime reason.

### Advice to Parents

Three areas seem to most concern parents: violence, sexual displays and horror movies. Violence is a bit tricky. In my opinion, the effects of violence on the small screen depend on the type of televised violence, and on whether or not your child is aggressive. Many boys are aggressive, and I would recommend that such boys work out their feelings by watching fantasy aggression where there is a distance between the aggressor and victim, such as westerns, war films and historical violence. Where possible, I would try to prevent a young child from watching news violence and violence in the neo-realistic police/detective programs; these, I fear, show that violence is "normal" and possibly define the targets at whom aggression can be directed. There is a danger that by mere exposure, we legitimate such acts of violence. I would have no fear, though, about children, whether aggressive or not, watching *Tom and Jerry* cartoons since the violence therein is stylistic, removed from life and — dare I say — imaginative.

Sexual portrayals are another matter. Here, I feel televised presentations do act as a charter for social action. They help define what is normal and acceptable in the wider society beyond the family. Personally, I feel the act of sex should not be a taboo area; my reading of the literature convinces me that sexual displays on television do not immediately prompt children to experiment with sex; they may, in the long term, accustom children to the idea that it is natural to sleep with the opposite sex both in and out of wedlock. Since attitudes to sex in our culture involve moral issues, this is an area where I feel it is the parents' obligation to be explicit about *their* own moral values, to explain to their children — before and during puberty — why they object (if they do) to TV's sexual portrayals, and to encourage their children *not* to watch programs with objectional depictions. On the other hand, there are parents who believe the act of sex is a culmination of the feeling of love; such parents may have no qualms about their children viewing such acts on television. In either case, merely to censure and/or make no comment seems an abnegation of parental duty.

Horror programs are designed to frighten. *Horrid* means literally *bristling with hair* or *making hair stand on end*. Remarkably few television programs are so potent, but I would recommend that children under seven not see televised horror programs. These are the programs which invade a child's dreams and, I feel, overwhelm his/her imagination. My own view is that only mature and relatively stable individuals can enjoy being horrified; young children are simply too immature.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, children mature through two relatively distinct televiewing styles until, at age eleven, they begin to understand television as adults do. I would recommend that before seven years, parent and child watch television together and get into the habit of talking about what they have seen. Once the child becomes accustomed to this, fruitful dialogues are easily established. To a lesser degree, communal viewing can also be rewarding for children between seven and eleven years. At that stage, children seek (and should not be discouraged from watching) programs with a standardized format. They have to see many such programs before becoming able to predict what will happen. At eleven-plus, you can be confident that your child understands television as well as, if not better than, you do.

In my view, no parent should feel threatened by television, particularly if two conditions are met: one, that the television set is not used as an indiscriminate baby-sitter to get the child from under-foot; and two, that parents and children watch and talk about programs together. If parents are prepared to let their child view TV's representation of society's machinations without comment, they have only themselves to blame if the child accepts the implicit values shown on television rather than parental standards.

Above all, remember that your child's televiewing style tells you a lot about him/her. Children who persistently watch television (or who constantly read books and have to be dragged from them) are probably signalling distress. Moreover, if your child persists in believing that fictional television programs are real — even after the age of eleven — that child is probably not enjoying any social success. The solution to these problems involves solutions in the child's real world — both within the family and outside.

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# suggestions for active television viewing

## by jack livesley

Many parents ask me for advice about home television viewing. In response to those requests, I have prepared a four-week outline to provide some guidelines for family viewing.

**Week One**

Keep a simple log. Record the number of hours each member of the family views TV, and the kinds of programs watched, such as dramas, situation comedies, documentaries, newscasts, sports, movies and specials, etc.

Discuss, as a family, the kinds of programs you watch. Perhaps one person might log the hours; have each person in the family report to him or her their viewing times. Another could keep track of the types of shows. *All* the family should participate and get used to discussing TV habits, likes and dislikes.

**Week Two**

On the weekend or early in the week, decide, as a group, on one mid-week program that most of the family enjoys; plan to watch it together. Situation comedies or dramas might be the best choice here. Each member will have a *simple* assignment. Younger people (below ages seven or eight) might just tell some of the story after the show. Others should pick out *one* character and discuss him or her along the following guidelines:

- Tell why you chose the character. More than one member might choose the same character, but strive for variety.
- Is the character *believable*? Do you know anyone remotely like this person? Is this person a "type", a certain nationality or stereotype?
- If you invited this character to your home, what would you serve for dinner?
- Make up a little story using this character, a story that did not happen in any of the episodes you've seen, but that *could* happen.
- Name another actor or actress who might play the part. Name a friend or acquaintance of yours who might suit the role.

Naturally, you may not have the time or inclination to try *all* of the above. They are suggestions. You may have other ideas. You might want to make them into games, guessing character, stories, actors and situations. The whole point is that you start *participating* in your TV viewing and do something with what you see.

**Week Three**

Talk about commercials. Why do we have them? Are there some programs—or networks—that don't have them? Why?

- Everyone should choose a commercial he or she likes, and one they can't stand. Discuss the reasons for likes or dislikes with each other.
- Discuss the types of products that are advertised on the programs you like. Why are *these* products advertised at these hours on these programs?
- Choose a *character* or *person* who appears in the commercial and ask yourself the same questions as you did about the characters you chose in week two. Are they real people? Believable? Would you want to get to know them, or have them over for dinner?
- Take a good, critical look at a commercial that you see over and over, and play some games with it to find out more about the elements of a commercial. Listen to the sounds and/or the music. Turn the sound off on your TV set and just watch the picture. What's the effect? Have someone cover the screen and just *listen*. Many commercials are made so they can be used on both radio *and* TV. Discover which ones they are.

Again, you may have other ideas. The important thing is to keep discussing and participating as a family.

**Week Four**

Let's go back to characters again. Pick a situation comedy, or drama, that has been running for several years. Discuss with each other what changes have occurred. Are any of the characters different now from what they were in the early years of the show? (Any of *Barney Miller's* group? *M*A*S*H*? "Hotlips" Houlihan has certainly changed over the years.) What characters have left the show and been replaced? How and why were the replacements chosen?

You might examine the "family" shows. (*The Waltons, Happy Days, The Jeffersons*, etc.) Discuss family behavior and such things as the relationship of parents and children. What are the problems of growing up in these families? Are they the same problems we have?

How do children under ten years of age think of policemen? Look at a crime show together; discuss the problems and how they are solved. Do you know any policemen in real life? What do *they* think of police shows?

This approach could lead to a whole study of violence, problem solving and role stereotyping on TV. Sometimes it helps to see that the roles are played by *actors* who have played other parts (e.g., *Quincy's* Jack Klugman was Oscar in *The Odd Couple*). Your family can find and discuss other examples.

Perhaps if your family has had any recent experiences with doctors or hospitals, you might like to discuss medical shows (*Trapper John, Marcus Welby*, etc.). Again, the whole point is to examine stories, situations, characters and most of all *relationships*, to help explore the relationships in your own family. Parents and children who become more interested in critical viewing could do further examinations of the effects of sound, music, dialogue, sets and scenery, in programs and commercials.

- Examine newscasts and documentaries. What arguments are put forth? What are the counter arguments? Perhaps you could prepare a short documentary or biography (with photos) of your family or your friends.
- What can we learn about *language* from viewing television? Make up a game about listing the kinds of words that are used over and over again in commercials; for example, *new, bigger, better, savings, now, relief, compare*.

When it comes to additional information regarding critical evaluation of TV, your local librarian will be able to help you find books and reference materials. TVOntario can also provide assistance. For information about workshops (for parent groups, schools and educators) or for print materials, write to us at: Educational Services, TVOntario, Box 200, Station Q, Toronto, Ontario M4T 2T1, Canada.